



Justice Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjqy20>

Body count news: How crime is presented in the news media

Steven M. Chermak ^a

^a Indiana University-Bloomington

Published online: 18 Aug 2006.

To cite this article: Steven M. Chermak (1994) Body count news: How crime is presented in the news media, *Justice Quarterly*, 11:4, 561-582, DOI: [10.1080/07418829400092431](https://doi.org/10.1080/07418829400092431)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07418829400092431>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

BODY COUNT NEWS: HOW CRIME IS PRESENTED IN THE NEWS MEDIA*

STEVEN M. CHERMAK
Indiana University-Bloomington

This article examines how the news production process affects the presentation of crime in the news media. Content analysis and ethnographic methods were used to determine the types of crime presented. The media rely heavily on criminal justice sources for crime story information; this reliance influences the type of stories selected and how they are presented to the public. The news media and the sources are motivated to cooperate because cooperation allows each party to accomplish organizational objectives. The media presents a distorted picture of the types of crime known to the police because sources define what is important about crime in a way that furthers organizational needs. News media select and produce those stories which they think are of most interest to the public. This research finds that violent crime predominates in print and electronic media. The presentation of crime, however, varies somewhat, depending on the need for news media to satisfy format requirements and on their degree of access to serious crime.

In this article, I examine how the news production process affects the presentation of crime in the news media. In particular, I use content and ethnographic methods to clarify what is newsworthy about crime in print and broadcast news media located in cities of different sizes. Although an increasing number of studies have examined crime in the news media over the past two decades (Marsh 1988), some shortcomings remain. This article makes three significant contributions to this growing body of research.

First, the article links content findings to ethnographic analysis to examine *why* particular crimes predominate in the news. Studies have used either content analysis to examine the presentation of crime in the news or ethnography to investigate how news organizations generate stories (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987, 1989). Most of the past research examining the presentation of crime fails to link these two methodologies; thus it limits the benefits that can be derived from considering both (Ericson et al. 1987).

* The author would like to thank the three anonymous reviews for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Ethnography helps to strengthen the inferences drawn from content analysis because it allows the researcher to see how organizational variables as well as selection and production decisions influence the presentation of news. In this research I combine these two methodologies to examine how news personnel and criminal justice sources determine what is presented to the public about crime.

Second, this article overcomes specific limitations in the extant content research. Graber's (1980) analysis is the most comprehensive examination of American news media to date. Graber's data, however, were collected more than 15 years ago. Although other content studies have been published since that time, most use two-week sample periods to generate their conclusions (Marsh 1991). If a celebrated case occurred during the sample period selected, then the results from these studies could be biased (see Walker 1989). A contemporary study is needed, which uses a longer sample period to minimize the effects of celebrated cases.

Researchers have been unable to resolve whether the presentation of crime news is different in print than in electronic media sources (Ericson et al. 1987; Garafalo 1981). Some researchers believe that the presentation of crime should vary with format differences (Altheide 1985; Ericson et al. 1991; Sheley and Ashkins 1981). For example, television news is concerned primarily with video images; television stations are more likely to be in competition with other stations for audience and advertising because cities often have several television stations but only one major newspaper; and time and space constraints affect television reporting more strongly than newspaper reporting (Sheley and Ashkins 1981:494; also see Ericson et al. 1991; Surette 1992). Research examining media in New Orleans (Sheley and Ashkins 1981) and Toronto (Ericson et al. 1991) found differences in the presentation of crime across media.

Others, however, argue that crime news should be similar across news organization because of the nature of source selection (Gordon and Heath 1981). Reporters from the two types of organization rely on similar sources for story information, and each attends closely to the presentation of news by the other to avoid missing a story. In the present research I compare content results across print and electronic media to examine how format differences and source selection affect the presentation of different types of crime.

Six content studies have made comparisons across cities (Cohen 1975; Gordon and Heath 1981; Graber 1980; Lotz 1991; Marsh

1988; Skogan and Maxfield 1981).¹ Only Graber's (1980) study, however, compared television content results across cities; few studies have examined the presentation of crime in cities with significantly different crime rates. The studies by Cohen (1975), Skogan and Maxfield (1981), and Gordon and Heath (1981) made comparisons across large cities with some variation in crime rate. Cohen (1975) compared the presentation of crime in Detroit and in Houston. Skogan and Maxfield (1981) and Gordon and Heath (1981) examined eight papers from San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Graber (1980) and Marsh (1988) examined the presentation of crime by media located in different-sized cities. Graber examined the presentation of crime in Indianapolis, Indiana; Evanston, Illinois; and Lebanon, New Hampshire. Marsh examined six newspapers located in Texas: two papers from Houston and one paper each from Dallas, Austin, Conroe, and Huntsville. These two latter studies suggested that the presentation of crime varies according to the violent crime rate in each city.

Third, pinpointing what is newsworthy about crime is useful for helping to determine whether the media affect public opinion or policy making. The news media are an important source of information, which the public uses to develop opinions about crime. Most people have little direct experience with the types of crime that are presented in the news (Ericson et al. 1987; Graber 1980; Hall et al. 1978; Stroman and Seltzer 1985; Surette 1992). It seems reasonable to assume that the media play a significant role in shaping opinions about crime because of the public's reliance, although it has been difficult to document direct links between the news media and public opinion (Surette 1992).

It also has been suggested that the news media play a critical role in how the criminal justice system responds to crime, but the nature of this role is not yet fully understood. Some research has documented an agenda-setting influence (Berk, Brookman, and Lesser 1977; Einstadter 1979; Fisher 1989; Gordon and Heath 1981; Haskins and Miller 1984; Pritchard 1986). For example, Forst and Blomquist (1991) argued that the news media invented social concern about missing children, which resulted in political pressure to make changes in the system. Others, however, believe that the ability of the media to influence the public and policy has

¹ Although I examined the presentation of crime across different cities, I could not compare the study by Lotz (1991) with the findings presented in the current analysis. Lotz (1991) performed a word content analysis comparing the number of times a word such as *murder* was mentioned in a story with the frequency of other words such as *drugs* or *died* (1991: 106-10). Lotz then compared frequency of each word across cities. The content analysis used in the current study and in the others discussed above relies on the analysis of the themes, not the words, that appear in the stories.

been overestimated (Chaffee 1975; Cumberbatch and Beardsworth 1976; Dobb and Macdonald 1979; McGuire 1986; Sacco 1982). After reviewing this literature, Surette (1992:87) concluded that the relationship between the news media and policy making is still unclear.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I used content analysis to examine the presentation of crime in print and electronic media. This method involves the transformation of content so that replicative and valid inferences can be made from text (Krippendorff 1980:21). One advantage of performing content analysis is that it reduces large amounts of media output to more manageable bits of data (Weber 1990). Reducing content by applying a consistent set of rules allows a researcher to estimate what is presented about a certain topic, and minimizes the possibility "that the findings reflect the analyst's subjective predispositions rather than the content of the documents under analysis" (Holsti 1969:4).

I collected content data from six print and three electronic media organizations. Media were selected according to city size; I selected the sample by generating a list of cities that had at least one newspaper with a circulation of 50,000 or greater.² Then I matched the cities according to population size and number of index offenses for 1990, and stratified them as medium, large, and extra-large.³ I selected media from two cities in each category to represent as many regions of the country and as much variation in crime rate as possible. I examined content from one newspaper in each of the six cities (two medium, two large, two extra-large) and one television station in each of three cities (one medium, one large, one extra-large). The analysis was limited to cities of these sizes because each has enough local serious crimes to help fill its newshole.⁴

I collected newspaper content from the *Albany (New York) Times-Union*, the *Buffalo News*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Dallas Times Herald*, and the *Detroit*

² Determined from the *Gale Directory of Media Publications* (Koek and Winlepack 1990).

³ Medium-sized cities are those with 100,000 to 400,000 inhabitants and 5,000 to 50,000 index offenses per year. Large cities have populations of 400,00 to 800,000, and 50,000 to 90,000 index offenses. Extra-large cities have populations of 800,000 to 1,500,000, with 90,000 to 150,000 index offenses.

⁴ I excluded cities such as New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles from consideration, even though they fit the criteria. A large portion of the past research on crime news draws its samples from papers in these cities (Gordon and Heath 1981; Graber 1980; Humphries 1981; Sherizen 1978; Skogan and Maxfield 1981). This past research provides an adequate basis for comparing the results of the current analysis.

News. Each set of papers (Albany-Buffalo, Cleveland-San Francisco, and Dallas-Detroit) meets the criteria for inclusion in the medium, large, and extra-large categories respectively. All six are dailies that have morning editions,⁵ and Albany, Buffalo, and Cleveland are single-paper cities.⁶

I coded newspaper content for every fifth day of the first six months of 1990,⁷ and collected 36 days of content data per newspaper. Newspaper content from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* was coded for 18 additional days during a three-month period in 1991. I did this for two reasons: first, it strengthened the reliability of comparisons between the newspaper and the television samples, because crime stories from the latter were drawn from 1991. Second, it allowed for a comparison with the results from the 1990 newspaper sample.

Content analysis of late evening television newscasts complements the findings from the print analysis, allowing for comparisons across media.⁸ I coded local evening broadcasts in Albany, Cleveland, and Dallas for seven nights a week during an eight-week span from May to July 1991. In each city, the most popular station (according to its rating) was selected.⁹ In all, 168 broadcasts were recorded and viewed in their entirety. Crime stories were transcribed and then content coded.

I conducted a theme analysis of content, using a combination of coding rules from earlier research (Ericson et al. 1991; Graber 1980). Content was coded from any crime story reported in a newspaper or throughout an entire broadcast. When the stories examined involved a specific crime incident, the information provided for them had to include a clear violation of the law to qualify them as crime stories. Approximately 11 percent of all the news stories were crime-related; crime was the fourth most likely category to be presented. I coded a total of 1,982 stories on specific crime incidents for the content analysis.

⁵ The newspapers in Dallas and Detroit had both morning and afternoon editions. Only the morning editions were coded, so that they could be compared directly with the newspapers from the other cities.

⁶ Technically, none of these are single-paper cities; national papers such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* compete directly with local publications. In addition, other local newspapers (e.g., suburban weeklies) are available. Of the local media considered, Albany, Buffalo, and Cleveland each had one newspaper that fit the criteria for inclusion; Dallas, Detroit, and San Francisco had two. I selected the newspaper with the higher daily circulation from each of the cities with two papers.

⁷ I took every-fifth-day samples on the basis of research showing that such samples do not differ significantly from figures for the entire month (Mintz 1949).

⁸ I chose the 11:00 or late evening news rather than the 6:00 news because I thought its coverage was more representative of the crime stories that the news organization believed were important for the entire day.

⁹ The ratings were obtained from the *Television and Cable Factbook* (1991).

In summer 1991 I conducted ethnographic observations of the crime news production process in one newspaper and one television station in a large metropolitan city.¹⁰ The newspaper ethnography occurred in an organization I call here the *Midwest Tribune*.¹¹ The *Tribune*, a large newspaper with a daily circulation of about 500,000, has a virtual monopoly of the local print audience within the city in question because no other large urban newspaper exists there.¹² I also conducted observations at a television station in the same city, which I call the *Midwest Nightly*.

Approximately 150 hours were spent in each news agency. I asked reporters whether I could follow their coverage of a particular story or shadow them as they made their routine daily checks. Most of the crime stories were produced between 11:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. at the newspaper, and between 3:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. at the television station; I made most of the observations during these shifts. In addition, I spent some late evenings at the newspaper and some early morning at the television station to see as much of the production process as possible.

Finally, I conducted 40 interviews to help in interpretations of observational data. I asked specific questions about the production process; in addition, I conducted structured, open ended interviews with reporters to gain a broader perspective on how each media organization produced stories on crime. I held interviews with personnel from the *Nightly*, from the *Tribune*, and from other organizations in different-sized cities to increase the generalizability of the observational findings.

FINDINGS

News personnel and representatives of criminal justice organizations are the primary participants in producing news about crime. The news media are considered a watchdog for democracy, processing the power to decide who are society's "authorized knowers" (Ericson et al. 1991; Tuchman 1978). If sources are excluded from the news production process, they cannot promote their organizational agendas. Conversely, the level of cooperation by a source organization determines the type and the quality of news provided. The source organizations limit access to organizational behavior: criminal justice sources provide news media with enough information to fill their daily news requirements, but maintain control by

¹⁰ See footnote 3 above.

¹¹ The names of the organizations are fictitious to protect privacy.

¹² This is not to say that the newspaper does not have to compete with other organizations such as the broadcast media or the national press.

barring the media from those regions of the organization where decisions are made (Ericson et al. 1989).

News and source organizations cooperate closely because each benefits from a cordial relationship. News organizations can present a large number of crime stories easily and cost-efficiently. The *Midwest Tribune*, for example, was strategically structured to provide access to criminal justice sources, which in turn allowed reporters to fill story needs with minimal complications. On average, the *Tribune* presented eight crime stories a day, most of which were produced by police and court beat reporters. The police beat was located on the ground floor of police headquarters; it provided access to police blotter reports, booking sheets, and a police public relations spokesman who spent "at least forty percent of [his] time dealing with the media" (personal communication). The court beat was located on the first floor of the county courthouse. Court reporters had open access to a variety of court resources: the court calendar; courtrooms; corridors outside the judges' chambers, which provided reporters with the opportunity to interact and establish relationships with work group personnel; and court documents such as indictments, motions, search warrants, and appellate decisions.

Reporters and criminal justice sources have similar conceptions of newsworthiness, even though they attempt to achieve different objectives by projecting particular images. News organizations use crime stories to accomplish business objectives (Chibnall 1977; Grabosky and Wilson 1989; Sherizen 1978); these organizations are motivated by profit, and sell news as their primary product. Friendly and Goldfarb (1967:36) described how news media rely on crime to attract consumers: "In a competitive situation where there are bound to be occasional or continual battles for readers and revenue, the usual weaponry is the reporting of crime." Although it is difficult to determine how strongly crime stories motivate consumers to read or view the news, the important point is that individuals who work for news organizations think crime news sells. In discussing why crime is so prevalent in the news, the reporters I observed and interviewed justified the heavy coverage by discussing the entertainment value of crime. One of the *Tribune* reporters commented that "the public has an insatiable appetite for crime."

Criminal justice organizations are responsible to demands from the public. Individuals from these organizations participate as news sources to shape the direction and intensity of these demands. The source organizations determine public exposure to official knowledge of crime by monitoring and controlling media selection

and production decisions. *Tribune* reporters, for example, had access to a large pile of police arrest reports. These provided them with more "newsworthy" crimes than could be presented, but also distorted what was received because reporters did not have access to records on actual calls received. The police left arrest reports on a counter for reporters to peruse. Reporters were restricted from information on actual calls received, however, because this information was kept behind a door next to this counter. Similarly, court reporters could produce a large number of stories because of their unrestricted access to courtrooms. Even so, the information presented in court stories was limited because reporters did not have access to the decision making that occurred behind closed doors. Plea negotiations, meetings to decide whether to charge a suspect, and conferences with judges in chambers were off limits.

Criminal justice sources are asked to make comments as story informants; as a result, they can control what is presented about crime in the stories selected. Patrol officers, detectives, police spokespersons, the police chief, or a wide variety of attorneys are asked by reporters to define what is newsworthy about crime. The news media benefit from this reliance on criminal justice sources because such sources are culturally accepted as credible, heightening the appearance of objectivity and fairness (Ericson et al. 1989; Tuchman 1978). This situation provides criminal justice sources with an open forum to justify decisions, respond to criticisms, generate support for innovative programs, and further their organizational objectives.

Although every crime committed has the potential to be news, only those consistent with news and source organizations' rationale for participating survive the news production process. Nearly four thousand crimes¹³ were mentioned in the 1,982 stories that covered a specific crime incident. The types of crime presented in news stories are presented in Table 1.

The findings show that seriousness is an important variable, influencing decisions about selection and production. Serious personal offenses such as murder, rape, and robbery were significantly

¹³ The types of crime mentioned in stories were coded as follows: If a reporter mentioned one, two, or three crimes in a story, I coded those crimes as crime1, crime2, and crime3 according to order of appearance. For example, if a story reported a murder, a rape, and a robbery, in that order, the murder was coded as crime1, the rape as crime2, and the robbery as crime3. If a suspect was charged with more than three crimes, such as murder, rape, robbery, burglary, and drug possession, the three crimes emphasized most strongly in the story were coded. If emphasis was not apparent, I coded the first three crimes in the order mentioned. Results are presented from each category (crime1, crime2, crime3). In addition, I combined the results for the crime1, crime2, and crime3 variables into a single variable called all crime, which includes all of the crimes that were coded. These results are presented in the last column of Table 1.

Table 1. Numbers and Percentages of Crimes by Category

Crime Category	Crime1 ^a (N=1,982)		Crime2 ^b (N=1,158)		Crime3 ^c (N=722)		All Crime ^d (N=3,862)	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Murder	543	27.4%	256	22.1%	125	17.3%	924	23.9%
Other Violent Crimes ^e	324	16.3	195	16.8	105	14.5	624	16.2
Victimless Crimes ^f	263	13.3	116	10.0	72	10.0	451	11.7
Special-Group Crimes ^g	185	9.3	122	10.5	86	11.9	393	10.2
White-Collar Crimes ^h	181	9.1	130	11.2	70	9.7	381	9.9
Crimes against Criminal Justice ⁱ	161	8.1	134	11.6	88	12.2	383	9.9
Misdemeanors	102	5.1	109	9.4	95	13.2	306	7.9
Property Offenses	133	6.7	63	6.0	61	8.4	263	6.8
Unspecified	90	4.5	27	2.3	20	2.8	137	3.5

^a First crime mentioned in a story.

^b Second crime mentioned in a story.

^c Third crime mentioned in a story.

^d Combines all three crimes.

^e Robbery, shootings, assaults.

^f Drugs, prostitution, gambling.

^g Sexual assault, child, elderly, bias-related victimizations.

^h Embezzlement, bribery, forgery, fraud, corporate crime, securities violations.

ⁱ Perjury, resisting arrest, obstruction of justice, tampering, intimidating witness/victims.

more likely to be presented than less serious crimes. Violent offenses accounted for nearly half of the crime stories presented. Conversely, misdemeanors and property offense stories accounted only for approximately 10 percent of the total.

The results in Table 1 show that nearly one-fourth of all crimes mentioned in crime stories were murders. Although the media presentation of murder does not reflect the frequency of that crime in official statistics, it indicates what the media think they must use to attract consumers. Murders are more serious than other crimes, both by law and in public perception. Because news space is limited, news organizations focus on the crimes that are most serious and are thought by the media to be most interesting to the public. In addition, source organizations benefit from heightened public sensitivity to the dangers in their community because that sensitivity helps to legitimate their role as the primary public institution responsible for fighting crime.

Results from the ethnographic observations support these content findings, but also show that seriousness provides only part of the explanation for the importance of a particular crime. An "ordinary homicide," in which an 18- to 24-year-old black male murders an 18- to 24-year-old black male, might be transformed into a crime story, depending on the availability of other news, but generally it will not be an important story. In practice, this type of homicide occurs too frequently to make news. Not all homicides are important news, and some never become stories because the news media recognize that not all have entertainment value. Conversely, a story that can emulate a Hollywood screenplay will receive large amounts of space (Surette 1989).

An informant from the *Tribune* discussed what was newsworthy about crime, and how homicides are ranked according to their audience attractiveness:

Death is news. Now I'm not talking about your ordinary, everyday homicide. You need something more. Bullets flying, police shooting, repeated incidents, twisted, weird. It's news. It's what people want to hear.

Other variables, such as the victim and the defendant involved, interact with the seriousness of the crime to determine which murders become news, how much space is provided to cover that murder, and what other types of crimes are presented in the news.

The results regarding the salience of violence in the news are consistent with past research (Ericson et al. 1991; Graber 1980; Humphries 1981; Lee-Sammons 1989; Marsh 1988; Mawby and Brown 1984; Roshier 1981; Sheley and Ashkins 1981; Skogan and Maxfield 1981). The presentation of victimless, special-group, and

white-collar crimes is not consistent, however. Table 1 shows that victimless crimes made up the third most frequently cited category of crime story. In the total for the victimless crime category, it is significant that approximately 11 percent of the first crimes mentioned in a story and 10 percent of the overall combined category (all crime) concerned drugs. These figures differ dramatically from Graber's findings more than a decade ago: her research revealed that drug offenses were only the tenth most likely crime to be mentioned, and accounted for only 2.8 percent of the 12 crime stories most likely to be reported (Graber 1980:39). Table 1 also shows that the special-group and the white-collar crime categories each accounted for approximately 10 percent of the total number of crimes mentioned in stories. In past research, special-group crimes such as domestic assaults and rape (Roshier 1981:27) and white-collar crimes (Evans and Lundman 1983; Graber 1980) were seldom reported in the news.

Types of Crime Presented in Print and Broadcast Media

Table 2 presents content results of comparisons across media, and notes whether significant differences existed in the first crime mentioned in print and electronic stories or in the combination variable (all crime). The results show that some crimes are equally attractive to both types of media, but that others are emphasized differently because each type of organization needs to capitalize on what makes its news appealing to the public. Murder, drug,¹⁴ and property offenses are emphasized similarly in print and in broadcast media. Yet both the first crime and the all crime category received different emphasis for white-collar and special-group crimes. Furthermore, the all crime variable was emphasized differently for violent crime, misdemeanors, and crimes against criminal justice.

I offer three reasons for the similarities in emphasis of murder, drug, and property offenses. First, the news media examined in this study draw their consumers from the same marketplace. The primary concern of both types of media is to attract local consumers and advertisers with a news formula of high entertainment value (Kaniss 1991:59). Crimes with the greatest audience appeal are emphasized similarly across media; those with the least interest are ignored by both. News personnel from both the *Tribune* and *Nightly* agreed that murders are marketable items. Police reporters from the *Tribune*, when leafing through the daily police reports, selected five or six crimes for further inquiry. Any murder in the

¹⁴ Sixty-five of the 218 drug stories concerned Manuel Noriega or Marion Barry. Drug offenses are presented in the same way across media when these two celebrated cases are removed from the newspaper sample.

Table 2. Categories of Crime Presented, by Print and Electronic Media

	First Crime			All Crime		
	Percentage	Newspaper	Television	Percentage	Newspaper	Television
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
Murder	27.5%	429	27.0%	114	23.7%	760
Other Violent Crimes	15.6	243	19.1	81	15.5 ^a	499
Property Offenses	7.2	113	4.7	20	6.9	222
Victimless Crimes	14.2 ^a	221	9.9	42	12.5 ^a	402
White-Collar Crimes	10.1 ^a	158	5.4	23	10.9 ^a	349
Special-Group Crimes	7.8 ^a	121	15.1	64	8.5 ^a	284
Misdemeanor	5.5	85	4.0	17	8.4 ^a	271
Crimes against						
Criminal Justice	8.5	133	6.6	28	10.4 ^a	335
Unspecified	3.6 ^a	56	8.0	34	2.8 ^a	90

^a Difference in comparison across media is significant; $p \leq .05$

pile was selected as a potential news story. Court reporters perused the court calendar for murders that had progressed in the court system. Similarly, the managing editor from the Nightly created a daily list of potential stories. The stories produced as news from this list were determined at an editorial meeting attended by editors, producers, reporters, and the news director. Most of the crime stories on this list concerned either new or ongoing murders. At one editorial meeting, for example, nine of the 13 crimes discussed were murders. The content results presented in Table 2 substantiate that murder was the most popular crime presented in both types of media, accounting for approximately 25 percent of both print and broadcast crime stories. Murder scenes are vivid, especially when body bags, ambulances, or grieving victims are captured by the camera or can be described in print.

A second reason for the similarities in presentation is that reporters from both types of organization rely on the same sources for information. Reporters from the *Tribune* and the Nightly drew primarily on police sources for arrest information, and on prosecuting attorneys or judges for court updates. This heavy dependence on criminal justice sources was also illustrated by content analysis: nearly half of the sources cited in print and electronic crime stories were either from the police or the courts. These sources are willing to provide information about murder and drug crimes because it benefits their organizations to do so. For example, one of the primary sources for court reporters consisted of prosecutors who worked in the major felonies division of the prosecutors office. Most of their cases were murders; they went out of their way to stop at the *Tribune* office if they thought they were working on a case with news value. The more dangerous the streets are perceived to be by the public, the easier it is for source organizations to justify increases in spending, budget, and personnel (Wilson and Fuqua 1975). Local judges and prosecuting attorneys are willing to cooperate with the media in exchange for good press, which helps them in their bids for reelection or in fulfilling other political aspirations.

Third, similarities exist because each popular medium attends closely to the news presented in other media (Ericson et al. 1989; Gordon and Heath 1981). Most cities have only one major newspaper, with minimal print competition. Newspapers, however, compete with local network television stations for consumers of news, or at least present similar types of news so that they do not appear to be scooped. The police beat reporters from the *Tribune* had a television set in their office to view nightly newscasts. Similarly, the managing editor from the Nightly read numerous city newspapers in the morning and added crimes to a list of potential stories, if

he thought any crimes could meet their format needs. When either a print or a broadcast organization misses a story, it can be redone, but it is treated differently because of differences in media format; thus it does not appear to the public to be old news.

Although murder and drug crimes are interesting to both types of organizations, the amount of space given to these stories depends on the ability of a story to satisfy format requirements. Media organizations rely on specific formats when presenting news that are particular to their medium (Altheide 1985; Ericson et al. 1991). Time, space, commercial, and other organizational considerations influence the selection of news for presentation (Altheide 1985). News organizations try to highlight the strengths of their own format over other types of media so that they can sell their product more effectively. An example from the ethnographic analysis illustrates how differences in format can result in presentation differences. On one occasion the *Tribune* covered the sentencing of a defendant convicted of rape. The *Nightly*, however, did not present this story because the importance of a television news story depends on the quality of video obtained. In this case the judge had decided to exclude cameras from the courtroom, thus preventing *Nightly* reporters from obtaining video.

The results presented in Table 2 show that special-group and white-collar crimes are emphasized differently. Special-group crimes were almost twice as likely to be presented on television as in print. Space is severely limited for television newscasts; to attract the widest audience possible, television stations must rely on members of special groups, such as child victims, who are easily identifiable and emotionally relevant to a wide array of viewers. Newspapers provide a broader range of crimes, and thus water down the importance of special-victim stories. Television stations, which do not have that luxury, must rely on what is attractive to the most people.

White-collar offenses were the fourth most likely story to be reported in newspapers, accounting for approximately 11 percent of the total. On the other hand, they were the least likely to be reported on television. These findings are consistent with the results presented by Ericson et al. (1991:247). White-collar crimes do not make important television stories because of their complexity, which can be analyzed more easily in a long newspaper account. A reporter from the *Tribune*, for example, covered a welfare scam over several days, involving employees at various levels of the Health and Human Services Department. This story was ignored by local television stations because the crime did not satisfy the visual format needs of television: the cameras could not focus on a specific

crime scene or victim. Also, the complexity of this crime could not be captured in a short sound bite; thus it was eliminated from consideration as a television story. The *Tribune*, on the other hand, had the space to explain the intricacies of this crime. Newspapers generally have a section designated for business news, which provides space to fully analyze white-collar offenses.¹⁵

I found significant differences in the presentation of the all crime variable for misdemeanors and crimes against criminal justice, which also can be attributed to format differences. Newspapers have enough space to present all the crimes that a defendant may be charged with, but television ignores all but the most sensational charge. If a defendant is charged with murder, robbery, tampering with evidence, and resisting arrest, a newspaper is more likely than television to include each charge in its story. A television station might cover this story, but would ignore charges other than murder because of stringent space limitations.

Types of Crime Presented in Each City

The news media considered in this study prefer local crime news because of its relevance to their audience. Comparisons across cities reveal whether newsworthiness is defined similarly by media with access to different types of crime. The index crime data for the six cities in this analysis illustrate significant differences in the amounts and types of local crimes available to media from the various cities. In 1990, for example, the Albany media had nine murders from which to select. In contrast, the Detroit media could choose from nearly 600.

I combined the print and broadcast results from the six cities into medium, large, and extra-large categories. The content results for these categories of crimes of *local* origin are presented in Table 3. (Crimes with a national focus were excluded.) Significant differences in comparing each of the categories with the others are noted in Table 3.

The findings presented in Table 3 show that print and broadcast media in all cities are willing to report on whatever local murders are available. The amount and type presented, however, depend on availability. News organizations with access to the smallest numbers of officially known murders (Albany, Buffalo) were significantly less likely to present a murder story than were

¹⁵ These differences in the presentation of white-collar crime also can be explained in part by the sample period. Various junk bond cases, including that of Michael Milkins, occurred during the newspaper sample period and sparked national interest. Although Ivan Boesky's case already had been completed, he was constantly reported in the news as testifying against others, and was released to a halfway house during the newspaper sample period.

Table 3. Type of crimes presented by city size

	Medium (Albany-Buffalo)	Large (Cleveland-San Francisco)	Extralarge (Dallas-Detroit)
Murder	15.5% ^a	26.8%	30.0%
Other Violent Crimes	18.0 ^b	13.9 ^c	17.7
Victimless Crimes	13.8 ^d	12.0 ^c	8.9
Special-Group Crimes	8.8	10.1	10.9
White-Collar Crimes	7.4 ^a	10.6	12.0
Crimes against			
Criminal Justice	12.1 ^d	10.4 ^c	6.2
Misdemeanors	12.2 ^a	6.9 ^c	4.5
Property Offenses	8.8 ^a	5.9	5.8
Unspecified	3.4	3.4	4.1

^a Differences in comparison of medium to large, and medium to extralarge is significant; $p \leq .05$.

^b Differences in comparison of medium to large is significant; $p \leq .05$.

^c Differences in comparison of large to extralarge is significant; $p \leq .05$.

^d Differences in comparison of medium to extralarge is significant; $p \leq .05$.

media in the large or the extra-large cities. For example, 15.5 percent of the stories in the medium-sized cities concerned murder, as did nearly 30 percent of the crimes in the extra-large cities. The results presented in Table 3 show that the medium-sized cities had the lowest percentage of reported murder stories, the large cities were in the middle, and the extra-large cities had the highest percentage, paralleling the distribution of officially reported murders.

The presentation of murder did not differ significantly between the large and the extra-large cities, although two to three times as many murders occurred in the extra-large cities. The similarities between the media in the large and the extra-large cities indicate a saturation point for the number of murders that can be presented. To compensate for the smaller number of murders, media in large cities cover a greater percentage of murders in detail and follow them through each stage of the criminal justice process. An informant from the *Tribune* (a newspaper that would be considered large) who formerly had worked for a New York City newspaper reflected on differences in the types of homicide covered in cities of various sizes:

When homicides occur in New York City, because it happens every day, it is only newsworthy when there is some drama attached. I did a murder story on a guy who used to cut records for Smokey Robinson. He was knifed in the studio, but was able to crawl out and flag down a cab. He wrote a letter to his wife in the cab on the way to the hospital. It was really a touching letter. Around here [near the *Midwest Tribune*] almost all homicides are covered and they are more likely to be followed across a number of days, because there are not as many to rely on.

In extra-large cities, new murders occur regularly. Reporters can present these as well as ongoing murder cases available from the court or correctional system. Therefore they have the luxury of choosing the most newsworthy murder to fill the amount of news space available. The criteria adopted by these media in defying an extraordinary and appealing murder are much different from those employed in smaller cities. An 18-year-old killed in a drug deal that went bad, for example, is less newsworthy than it would be in smaller cities because such crimes are "normal" occurrences in extra-large cities. The crimes that become news in cities with large amounts of crime would be news if they occurred in any city, but differences exist because the sheer volume of crime increases the likelihood that an extraordinary crime will be discovered. "In New York City," commented one informant, "it is not whether your should go cover a murder. But if there are not at least three victims, then you don't bother, unless it is a child or an elderly victim." Content analysis supports this point, revealing that media in extra-large cities are the least likely to present murders with only one or two victims. Approximately 40 percent of the local Detroit and Dallas murders fell into this category. In contrast, 87.5 percent of the local murders presented in Albany and 60 percent of those presented in Buffalo had only one or two victims.

Table 3 shows that media in medium-sized cities were more likely to present other violent crimes and victimless crimes than were the media in the large and extra-large cities. This point provides additional support for the finding that the seriousness of the crime is an important variable, determining whether a crime is worth presenting. The reliance of Albany and Buffalo media on such crimes illustrates their tendency to present the most serious type of crime available. These cities simply do not have a continuous supply of local murders, so reporters cover crimes less serious than homicide. A managing newspaper editor from a medium-sized city explained how he searches for the most serious crime available: "What we seek is the highest level [of crime] we can get to. . . . If there is not a murder, than we sink down a notch. If a rape happens, suddenly it becomes newsworthy. If there is not rape, a mugging might fill the [news]hole."

The results in Table 3 show that misdemeanors and property offenses are presented in the media in medium-sized cities differently than in either the large or the extra-large cities. The medium-sized cities were significantly more likely to depend on these less serious crimes, and media in extra-large cities were least likely to present such offenses. Approximately 5 percent of the total stories presented in Detroit print, Dallas print, and Dallas broadcast

media concerned misdemeanor crimes such as harassment or trespass. In contrast, misdemeanors accounted for 12.2 percent of the stories in Albany broadcast, Albany print, and Buffalo print media. Nonserious crimes are less likely to be filtered out of the decision-making process in cities with the smallest amounts of crime. Media in the largest cities concentrate on selecting the most newsworthy murder, those in smaller cities must choose the most newsworthy crime.

DISCUSSION

News media select and produce stories according to a process whose primary participants have similar ideas about the types of crime worth presenting, although this convergence is due to each organization's efforts to accomplish organizational objectives. The news media and the source organizations benefit from appearing to have an adversarial relationship. In fact, however, the working relationship between news media and criminal justice sources allows reporters to produce a large number of stories without interference. News media are entrusted with the role of an effective public information funnel, presenting stories worthy of public concern, monitoring organizational behavior, and protecting public interests. Source organizations provide news media with access, input, and information so that the media can construct crime news in the manner most likely to generate public concern and support for the sources.

The organizational needs of each party transform this outwardly and potentially adversarial relationship into one of mutual cooperation. The news media and the sources have routinized the production of news to further their organizational objectives and ensure control (Ericson et al. 1987; Tuchman 1978). The level of access provided to news media depends on the source's need to garner public support. Public organizations, such as the police, must be highly cooperative and must expose different areas of the police organization because of the need for public legitimation. This situation allows them to control their fate: they monitor the amount and type of information they make available by limiting access to certain parts of the organization and using spokespersons to respond to questions (Ericson et al. 1989). In contrast, private organizations restrict media access because they do not need the same level of public support.

How heavily the news media rely on particular sources depends on a source's ability to regularly supply information consistent with the news of media organizations. Prosecuting attorneys are used

much more frequently than defense attorneys because of their ability to comment on a variety of different cases. Typically, a small group of prosecutors work on the cases that make the news, thus providing reporters with the opportunity to develop ongoing relationships with them. In contrast, involvement by defense attorneys is sporadic. Major felonies may be handled by public defenders or by any of numerous private attorneys. Thus the strength of the relationship between defense attorneys and court reporters is significantly lower. Ineffective sources or those not needed regularly are eliminated from the process because they cannot provide newsworthy information.

This differential reliance on criminal justice sources distorts the images of crime that are presented in the news. These images are shaped by those who participate as sources, and are influenced further by news organizations' need to present a portrait they think will sell. Although various police sources from different levels of the organization are cited in stories, the primary police gatekeeper is a spokesperson who participates in the news production process to polish the department's image. Court stories reflect prosecuting attorneys' views because of the difficulties of establishing relationships with defense attorneys. Judges request coverage of potentially newsworthy cases, hoping to gain public support. Unaffiliated sources, such as crime victims, defendants, experts, and citizens, typically are excluded from the news production process. These sources receive media access only if they can provide newsworthy information to satisfy a news organization's economic goals. A victim's emotional reaction to the loss of a loved one is the preferred contribution.

Future research must expand on how this process of source control influences the presentation of news. Does a source organization's ability to control what is presented vary by type of story? By the importance of the story? Do source organizations increase their opportunity to exert control when they use more powerful individuals in the organization to comment on a story? Examination of these issues will help us to understand more fully how the reliance on particular sources restricts the images of crime that are presented in the news media.

The content results presented here have important implications for understanding how the public develops opinions about crime. The shifts in newsworthiness found across time, in comparisons of literature, show that news and source organizations accommodate public and political interest. Drug, special-group, and white-collar crimes are currently popular because of heightened sensitivity to these offenses. This sensitivity filters through news

and source organizations so as to increase the newsworthiness of these crimes. For example, even though drug sale or possession crimes are less serious than personal violence crimes such as aggravated assault or robbery, they are defined as more newsworthy because of current political and public opinion. Public, political, and academic interest in drug crimes increased dramatically immediately before the sample period I selected; drugs are much more newsworthy today than when Graber (1980) conducted her research. Sources provide information about these stories, and the media present them because of the heightened interest.

The prominent coverage by the news media increases the interest in these types of crime. Because news space is limited, the media emphasize extreme, dramatic cases. These cases are presented as representative of the problem, and have the potential to distort what the public and politicians think is important about the given type of crime. Reporters who work for news media in cities such as Dallas and Detroit have an abundance of local new and ongoing murder cases to present, and thus have higher standards of newsworthiness. The murders presented are those which deviate most from what is statistically normal. News media in other cities, such as Albany or Buffalo, present a more accurate portrait of murder because they give space to all the murders that occur. This point is particularly significant because research shows that the public is more likely to fear crimes that occur locally and to be reassured when heinous crimes are committed elsewhere (Heath 1984).

The most deviant cases, or those which can be grouped together as a moral panic,¹⁶ receive extraordinary amounts of prominent coverage. These stories provide "availability heuristics" to consumers, where by the overall evaluation of events is determined by single outlying examples that come easily to mind (Roberts 1992:122). Although these incidents represent crime in its most extreme form, the public is more likely to think they are representative because of the emphasis by the media. It follows that residents of larger cities are more likely to have a distorted view of crime and heightened levels of fear. Thus, the overall presentation of crime, however, may have minimal effects on public opinion or policy decisions because it is mediated by other competing influences such as personal experiences, exposure to other media, and individual conversations. Yet the media overemphasis of celebrated cases and moral panics may be influential because people are more likely to recall these events when thinking about crime: they can be distinguished easily from all other aspects of our construction of reality.

¹⁶ The process whereby journalists link a number of crimes around a more general theme is known as a "moral panic" (see Cohen 1972; Gusfield 1981).

REFERENCES

- Altheide, D. L. (1985) *Media Power*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Barbar, S. (1987) *News Cameras in the Courtroom: A Free Press-Fair Trial Debate*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Berk, R. A., H. Brookman, and S. L. Lesser (1977) *A Measure of Justice: An Empirical Study of Changes in the California Penal Code 1955-1971*. New York: Academic Press.
- Chaffee, S. (1975) *Political Communication: Enduring Issues for Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Chibnall, S. (1977) *Law and Order News*. London: Tavistock.
- Cohen, S. (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. London: MacGibbon and Kee.
- (1975) "A comparison of Crime Coverage in Detroit and Atlanta Newspapers." *Journalism Quarterly* 52(4):726-30.
- Cumberbatch, G. and A. Beardsworth (1976) "Criminals, Victims, and Mass Communications." In E. C. Viano (ed.), *Victims and Society*, pp. 72-90. Washington, DC: Visage.
- Dobb, A. and G. MacDonald (1979) "Television Viewing and Fear of Victimization: Is the Relationship Causal?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37:170-79.
- Ericson, R. V., P. M. Baranek, and J. B. L. Chan (1987) *Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- (1989) *Negotiating Control: A Study of News Sources*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- (1991) *Representing Order: Crime, Law, and Justice in the News Media*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Evans, S. S. and R. J. Lundman (1983) "Newspaper Coverage of Corporate Price-Fixing." *Criminology* 21:529-41.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (1990) *Crime in the United States, 1990*. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.
- Fisher, G. (1989) "Mass Media Effects on Sex Role Attitudes of Incarcerated Men." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 20:191-203.
- Forst, M. L. and M. E. Blomquist (1991) *Missing Children: Rhetoric and Reality*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Friendly, A. and R. L. Goldfarb (1967) *Crime and Publicity: The Impact of News on the Administration of Justice*. New York: Twentieth Century Fund.
- Gans, H. (1979) *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, Newsweek and Time*. New York: Pantheon.
- Garafalo, J. (1981) "Crime and the Mass Media: A Selective Review of Research." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 18:319-50.
- Gordon, M. and L. Heath (1981) "The News Business, Crime and Fear." In D. Lewis (ed.), *Reactions to Crime*, pp. 227-50. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Graber, D. (1980) *Crime News and the Public*. New York: Praeger.
- Grabosky, P. and P. Wilson (1989) *Journalism and Justice: How Crime Is Reported*. Leichhardt, Austria: Pluto.
- Gusfield, J. (1981) *The Culture of Public Problems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hall, S., C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke, and B. Roberts (1978) *Policing the Crisis*. London: Macmillan.
- Haskins, J. B. and M. M. Miller (1984) "The Effects of Bad News and Good News on a Newspaper's Image." *Journalism Quarterly* 61(1):3-13, 65.
- Heath, L. (1984) "Impact of Newspaper Crime Reports on Fear of Crime: Multimethodological Investigation." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47(2):263-76.
- Holsti, O. (1969) *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities*. City?: Addison-Wesley.
- Humphries, D. (1981) "Serious Crime, News Coverage, and Ideology: A Content Analysis of Crime Coverage in a Metropolitan Paper." *Crime and Delinquency* 27(2):191-205.
- Kaniss, P. (1991) *Making Local News*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Koek, K. E. and J. Winklepack (1990) *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media*. New York: Gale Research.

- Krippendorff, K. (1980) *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Lee-Sammons, L. (1989) "Television News Reporting of Crime: An Analysis of Three Models of Newsmaking." Doctoral dissertation, Washington State University.
- Lotz, R. E. (1991) *Crime and the American Press*. New York: Praeger.
- Marsh, H. L. (1988) "Crime and the Press: Does Newspaper Crime Coverage Support Myths about Crime and Law Enforcement?" Doctoral dissertation, Sam Houston State University.
- (1991) "A Comparative Analysis of Crime Coverage in Newspapers in the United States and Other Countries from 1960-1989: A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 19:67-79.
- Mawby, R. I. and J. Brown (1984) "Newspaper Images of the Victim: A British Study." *Victimology* 9:82-94.
- Mcguire, W. (1986) "The Myth of Massive Media Impact: Savagings and Salvagings." In G. Comstock (ed.), *Public Communication and Behavior*, pp. 175-257. New York: Academic Press.
- Meyer, J. C., Jr. (1975) "Newspaper Reporting of Crime and Justice: Analysis of an Assumed Difference." *Journalism Quarterly* 52(4):731-34.
- Mintz, A. (1949) "The Feasibility of the Use of Samples in Content Analysis." In H. D. Lasswell, N. Leiter, R. Fedner, J. M. Goldsen, A. Gray, J. L. Jones, A. Kaplan, D. Kaplan, A. Mintz, I. De Sola Pool, and S. Yakolsee (eds.) *The Language of Politics: Studies in Quantitative Semantics*, pp. 127-52. New York: George Stewart.
- Morash, M. and D. Hale (1987) "Unusual Crime, or Crime as Unusual Images of Corruption at the Interstate Commerce Commission." In T. S. Bynum (ed.), *Organized Crime in America: Concepts and Controversies*, pp. 129-49. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.
- Pritchard, D. (1986) "Homicide and Bargained Justice: The Agenda-Setting Effect of Crime News on Prosecutors." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50:143-59.
- Roberts, J. V. (1992) "Public Opinion, Crime, and Criminal Justice." In M. Tonry (ed.), *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, pp. 99-180. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Roshier, B. (1981) "The Selection of Crime News by the Press." In S. Cohen and J. Young (eds.), *The Manufacture of News: Social Problems, Deviance and the Mass Media*, pp. 40-51. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Sacco, V. (1982) "The Effects of Mass Media on Perceptions of Crime." *Pacific Sociological Review* 25:475-93.
- Sheley, J. F. and C. D. Ashkins (1981) "Crime, Crime News, and Crime Views." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45(4):492-506.
- Sherizen, S. (1978) "Social Creation of Crime News: All the News Fitted to Print." In c. Winick (ed.), *Deviance and Mass Media*, pp. 203-24. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Skogan, W. G. and M. G. Maxfield (1981) *Coping with Crime: Individual and Neighborhood Reactions*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Stroman, C. and R. Seltzer (1985) "Media Use and Perceptions of Crime." *Journalism Quarterly* 62:340-45.
- Surette, R. (1989) "Media Trials." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 17:293-301.
- (1992) *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images and Realities*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Television and Cable Factbook (1991) Washington, DC: Warren.
- Tuchman, G. (1978) *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. NY: The Free Press.
- Walker, S. (1989) *Sense and Nonsense about Crime: A Policy Guide*. 2nd ed. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Weber, R. P. (1990) *Basic Content Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Wilson, J. V. and P. Q. Fuqua (1975) *The Police and the Media*. Boston: Little, Brown.